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Language teaching methodology is defined and three representative instructional approaches are described. Definition of language teaching methods is attempted through comparison with approach and technique. The essentials of the translation, direct, and audiolingual methods of language instruction are outlined (with emphasis on the latter), and the way in which they are related to the study of language, literature, or linguistics is discussed. (AF)

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Number 8

Method in Language Teaching

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METHOD IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

What method is

Participants in discussions of the methodology of language teaching frequently lack the common ground upon which to build fruitful debate. At one extreme is a philosophical and psycholinguistic dialogue, largely on the axiomatic level – a level which may provide an approach to methodology, but which cannot in itself be labelled method. On the other hand, anecdotal presentations of pedagogical tricks, however well classified and no matter how diverting and perceptive, are not really methodological. Classroom techniques may reflect a particular method, or may implement a method – they may even provide data to evaluate a method, but they are not, in and of themselves, method.

Method is, then, neither the intricate set of assumptions, explicit or implicit, about language and language acquisition that characterizes a particular approach to language teaching, nor is it the list of drills, exercises, diagrams and explanations that makes up the technique of the talented classroom teacher. Method lies somewhere between the labyrinthine algebra of the grammarian and the psychologist and the actions of an overworked teacher industriously following her lesson plans.

It is possible to initiate discussions of method in the philosophical labyrinth or in the classroom; to begin with approach or with technique. For example, let us begin with the classroom teacher. A skilled teacher may develop over the years certain techniques that "work" – that bring about a desired language learning event – that guide the behavior of the student in the direction the teacher wants. If these classroom strategies show structurally unifying characteristics and tend to form a coherent procedure, they may come to be regarded as components of a method. This route to method has been traveled time and again, as is evident from those many methods which are named after one of their successful practitioners or after a characteristic technique. But though a particular method may historically derive from a set of techniques, a method may, by definition, be found only where pragmatically acceptable techniques are supported by theoretical assumptions.

FL 001 490

As one of the authors of this article has written elsewhere: "Method is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected approach. An approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural."[1] In a perfect world an assembly of savants might decide for all time just what language really is, and how we acquire a first language, or learn a second. These precious truths would then be passed on to an omniscient language-pedagogy engineer who would transform them into an all-purpose, fool-proof method for language teaching. The set of procedures, in the form of a syllabus, textbook, program, curriculum, or whatever, would be passed on to the teacher, who then could choose the weapons to accomplish the high purpose of language teaching. But, in our less than perfect world, instead of a smooth one-way route from approach through method to technique, we find a busy intersection where each of these three aspects of the total language learning process is continually modifying the others.

Language teaching methods come and go, ebb and flow. Some achieve wide popularity, then decline. Why the swing from oral learning to rule learning, back to oral learning, and yet again to rules? If a method is successful, why doesn't it remain in wide favor? The reasons do not lie in the failure of any particular set of techniques, for often

the same techniques reappear in the next method to gain favor. The reasons are rather to be found in the shifts in linguistic, psychological and pedagogical concepts which in turn cause corresponding shifts in notions of what it means to acquire, teach, or learn a language. For example, language learning tended to mean quick and accurate translations of readings in the 1930's, but by the 50's it meant facile ability in aural comprehension and oral production.

As our beliefs about the nature of language change, our faith in a method is affected, since we all value consistency. When language is seen as a closed system of contrasting patterns of phonology and syntax, a method which aims to teach aural-oral mastery of a finite set of sentence patterns enjoys theoretical support. But if we accept the view that language is a small set of basic relationships capable of infinite variation through expansion and transformation, we will feel constrained to adjust our methods to fit these new "facts" of linguistic theory.

Again, as the psycholinguists' view of language acquisition processes changes, so must classroom teaching techniques. If language is a set of habits, then mim-mem and stimulus-response practice to shape new habits dominates the lessons. Some recent psycholinguistic theory, however, holds that children are born with an innate set of linguistic universals which they use to acquire their first language. Stimulus-response explanations are alien to this theory and consequently, as applications of the theory are extended to second language teaching, the value of learning through habit formation and the most common practice procedures of the audiolingual approach are brought into question.[2] Methods, then, are shaped by many different theories, and the popularity of a method may depend on the popularity of any of these theories.

Nevertheless, all language teaching worthy of the name must follow some sort of method. That method must include, as does all teaching, the selection of materials to be taught, the gradation of those materials, their presentation, and pedagogical implementation to induce learning.[3] Method, we repeat, is by definition procedural, it is the sum and structure of the selection, gradation, and characteristic pedagogy which is carried out on the basis of certain axioms which form the underlying appraoch.

Two earlier methods in prototype

Man can study his principle means of communication in three different ways. One of these is traditionally considered "training," while the other two are usually considered "education."

First, an individual may study a foreign language so that he can participate in the cultural affairs of the society which uses that language. Whether the society is living or long dead is irrelevant to this particular reason for study. The Peace Corps candidate who studies Hausa in order to teach Africans malaria prevention, and the scholar who studies Hittite in order to read history in cuneiform inscriptions are brothers under the skin. Each wishes to use the language he studies as a means to a basically non-linguistic end. Each needs to control the language sufficiently well to operate in some corner of the culture. He must be trained in some skill-building way designed to help him accomplish his specific goals. Indeed, we often speak of the "four skills" of aural understanding, oral production, reading ability, and writing ability. The Peace Corps candidate may have an interest only in the first two; the scholar, with access only to written records, has interest only in the third and, perhaps, the fourth.

Second, and usually considered "educational," is the study of artistic language. Certain gifted individuals respond to their environments with greater sensitivity than do we ordinary mortals, and some of these individuals (whom we often call poets), are able to communicate their sensitivity to the rest of us through language. Their language is considered worthy of educational academic study, both by those who speak the poets' native languages and by those who no not, in an effort to arrive at a wider understanding of the meaning of life.

Third, some students of language are interested in gaining insights into how language works – its peculiarities, its geographical, temporal, or social spread, and how it is acquired, either as a native or as a foreign language. This is generally considered educational study as well.

We will, within our present discussion, call these three ways of investigating language the study of language, the study of literature, and the study of linguistics respectively. It is useful to keep them separate in speaking of language teaching – especially in discussing earlier methods – because the proponents of these methods did not always separate them on the approach level, and did not always take advantage of the findings of one kind of language study to benefit another kind of language study. This is evident in the two central methods described in this section. While they are referred to as "earlier" methods, they are still, in some instances, followed today.

The first of these methods is often called the grammar-translation method. By grammar here is usually meant the series of rules or generalizations that is intended to describe the target language. A successful "grammar" performance by the student usually means his ability to recite the list of German prepositions which take the dative, or to give the forms of the Latin verb "to be" in the particular arbitrary order sum, es, est . . . , or to name the conjugation to which the Spanish verb cantar belongs. In a more sophisticated use, it may mean that the student is successful if he can puzzle out a fill-in-the-blanks exercise, oral or written, on the model "el perro _____ un animal." That is, he must extract from his soy, eres, es conjugation the form that is labeled third person singular present and fit it into the blank. His performance is then judged by the speed and accuracy with which he can do these tasks.

The question that is always raised about the grammar portion of this method is "Is this the study of language or the study of linguistics?" If it is the former, it should, according to our earlier statement, enable the student to operate in some or most of the aspects of the society in which the language is used to conduct its cultural business. But it is doubtful if the Germans spend much of their time discussing the prepositions used with the dative case, or if Spanish speakers ask each other to fill in the blanks in sentences. To the extent that they do so, the study is valuable and relevant. Some teachers would see that this kind of study of grammar provides only the basis for studying the language rather than the language itself. To this extent, it is a sort of study of low-grade linguistics – that is, it gives some insights into how the language under study works, even though these insights are often phrased in terms more appropriate to the native language grammar than to the target language grammar.

But what of the other end of the grammar-translation method? How does translation fit in? When students of the grammar-translation method are not reciting rules or filling in blanks, they are frequently rendering foreign language passages into English or putting English passages into the foreign language. Again, one must ask, what is this the study

of? Is it language? If it enables the student to operate in the society which uses the language, such translation must become an instantaneous skill, as indeed it may for some students after long years of agonizing practice. Is it the study of literature? Marginally perhaps, if one begins with a literary work to translate. Is translation the study of linguistics? Again, the answer must be that the linguistic insights gained are elementary and are on the truistic level for most linguists: perhaps that decent word-for-word translation is impossible; that different languages use different structures to express different things differently.

All this is not to say that it is impossible to learn a language through the grammar-translation method. The above-average student can gain a good deal from the method, can collect a vast amount of information that some day, somewhere, given the right circumstances, just might "nucleate"[4] into a useful command of the language. The odds, however, are not attractive. A good deal of the difficulty with the grammar-translation method seems to arise from the confusion of linguistic, literary, and language aims – possibly out of a misguided effort to include respectable "educational" material in a "training"-centered academic exercise.

The direct method, the second of the two central methods, is much more focused and makes no pretension toward literary or linguistic aims, nor does it take into account literary or linguistic findings. Direct method teachers attempt to use only the target language on all levels, ask for no statements about grammar, proceed through conversation, reading, and writing in the target language, and give no attention to translation. It is, in its purest form, the direct antithesis of the grammar-translation method. The direct method is clearly aimed at giving students sufficient control of a language to operate in the society which employs that language. The direct method teaches without the emphasis on choice of materials that characterizes the method described in the following section. The valuable increase in relevance and efficiency that arises from the linguistic description and comparison of the target and native languages is lacking in the direct method. Nevertheless, it clearly shows an advance over the grammar-translation method when the goal is language control.

Although we have commented here upon two widely-used and well-established methods as if they occurred only in pure form, a cursory examination of texts and syllabuses will show many that illustrate a mixed language-teaching methodology. It is perhaps unnecessary to mention that such mixed methods often reflect a curious inconsistency at the approach level.

The dominant method today: audiolingual

"What teaching method do you use?" Ask this question of almost any foreign language teacher in our schools today, and the reply will be "the audiolingual method," "oral approach," "aural-oral method," "linguistic method," or one of the other terms used to indicate certain procedures which share the same approach level assumptions.[5] An examination of current journal articles, a look at the introductions to new textbooks (and even revisions of old ones) will conform this – the currently accepted method is audio-lingual. Nearly all of us use it, or claim to use it.

What then is this method? Certainly the question should not be hard to answer considering the number of articles, books, lectures, conferences, and courses on the

subject in recent years. But these discussions are often overly concerned with techniques. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to reconsider the basic assumptions of the audiolingual method before we take a look at the techniques most commonly employed to implement it.

This modern method has its theoretical base in an understanding of the nature of human language and the psychology of second language learning quite different from that underlying grammar-translation or even the direct method. Twentieth-century linguistic science has been the main source of the new ideas and knowledge from which language teachers have developed this method. Charles C. Fries set forth the implications of linguistics for language teaching most forcefully and effectively in his now classic 1945 monograph Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language. He there insists that the initial tasks in learning a new language are "first, the mastery of the sound system . . . second, the mastery of the features of arrangement that constitute the structure of the language." Thus Fries applies to language teaching two basic premises of structural linguistics concerning the nature of language: language is primarily oral, and language is a system of contrasting structural patterns. To this is added a third premise: language is a communicative activity of human societies, and therefore "accuracy," not mere "correctness," must be the standard for mastery from the beginning, "an accuracy based upon a realistic description of the actual language as used by native speakers in carrying on their affairs."[6]

These linguistic premises are reflected in the audiolingual method by the following requirements, at least for the first stages of language learning:

1) The student must learn to use orally with normal speed the foreign language response that is required by any of the situations that he has studied.

2) The major structural patterns of the linguistic system, presented in meaningful contexts, are the language materials to be learned.[7]

The psychological assumptions about the nature of human language acquisition and behavior which have influenced the method have been drawn from behaviorist theory. Its influence is clearly seen in Bloomfield's description of language behavior in stimulus-response terms, and his view that language consists of a great many complex activities united into a single far-reaching complex of habits.[8] Psychologists themselves, although long interested in child language development, until recently took little direct interest in problems of second language learning; however, they assented to the linguist's and language teacher's assumption that "language is a system of extremely well-learned habitual responses."[9] A more direct application of psychological theory has come from the concepts of operant behavior and instrumental learning formulated by B. F. Skinner who first pointed out that verbal behavior exemplifies operant behavior, thereby describing the mechanism for establishing new language habits. Moreover, in learning a second language it is assumed that the already established first language habits tend to interfere with the process of acquiring the set of second language habits wherever the native language and foreign language systems are in conflict.

These psychological conclusions are reflected in the method in the following ways:

1) Memorization and practice drills are used extensively to establish the new language skills as habits.

2) Materials take into account contrasts between the native language and the foreign language systems.

Over the past twenty-five years, these few assumptions by linguists and psychologists about language and language behavior have been the source from which modern teaching methods have developed, methods which have brought far-reaching changes in classroom procedures (emphasizing oral language habit formation) and teaching materials (employing sound linguistic description and contrastive analysis to select and order the language features to be taught).

The terms "mimicry-memorization" and "pattern practice," which are frequently used in describing the new methodology, each reflect the influence of both linguistic and psychological concepts. "Mimicry" recognizes the linguists' assertions that language is primarily oral and that native speaker models are ultimately the only completely acceptable models for imitation. "Pattern" represents the system of the language, each pattern a part of the system of systems of which the language is constructed. The language "item" to be learned is not an individual sound, word, or sentence, but that sound in contrast to other sounds of a phonological system; that word as the member of a lexical cluster; that sentence pattern in relation to other sentence patterns. The influence of behaviorist psychology is shown by the second term in each pair – "memorization" and "practice" are the chief mechanisms for establishing habit. "The command of language is a matter of practice ... language learning is overlearning, anything less is of no use," says Bloomfield,[10] echoing three hundred years later the words of Comenius, "Every language must be learned by practice rather than rules...."

"Mim-mem" and "patt-prac" are two important and complementary classroom tools of an audiolingual method. One or the other may dominate in a given lesson or even a whole set of lessons, but fundamentally they can be viewed as steps in a procedure by which the student is first presented with the new foreign language item and gains familiarity with and conscious control over it (through mim-mem), and then progressively gains language mastery as recognition and production of the item are made unconscious habit (through pattern-practice). The precise steps in this procedure are recognition, imitation, and repetition, followed by variation and selection.[11] To these steps we may add another which is commonly used with older students: explication. Usually coming between repetition and variation, explication typically consists of linguistic comments about the pattern or item, often elicited from the students as an inductive generalization from examples. The approach principle here seems to be that mature students, at least, are helped in language learning by some sort of systematic organization, overtly presented.

Summary

Our purpose here has been to present a concept of method in terms of its relationship to the other components of language teaching. We have, hopefully, demonstrated that method, while it exists apart from basic theoretical assumptions on the one hand and day-to-day teacher-pupil interaction on the other, is nevertheless dependent upon them. We can make assumptions without feeling obliged to invent procedures to implement them; we can use classroom techniques without relating them to a particular method. But method must be based on axioms, and it must be implemented through techniques selected to lead the student to the desired language behavior, as defined by those axioms.

We believe that keeping these interrelationships in mind will clarify discussions of a particular method.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Edward M. Anthony, "Approach, Method and Technique," English Language Teaching, 17 (January, 1963) 63-67.

[2]Leon A. Jakobovits, "Implications of Recent Psycholinguistic Developments for the Teaching of a Second Language," Language Learning, 18 (June, 1968) 89-109.
David McNeill, "Developmental Psycholinguistics," in The Genesis of Language: A Psycholinguistic Approach, Frank Smith and George A. Miller, eds. (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 67-73.

[3]William F. Mackey, Language Teaching Analysis (London, 1965), pp. 156-157.

[4]Kenneth L. Pike, "Nucleation," The Modern Language Journal, 44 (November, 1960) 291-295.

[5]For us the use of a term like audiolingual alternatively with approach, method, or technique never implies that these combinations are synonymous. Audiolingual approach embraces an intricate series of postulates and assumptions about language and learning, a number of possible methods, and innumerable techniques. Audiolingual Method is used to describe a set of cumulative curricular procedures toward a stated language goal, again involving a large number of varying techniques. An audiolingual technique may be merely a classroom procedure during which the teacher and student talk and listen, and might easily be used in, for example, grammar-translation methodology:

> Teacher: Alvin, list the German prepositions which govern the dative.
> Alvin: aus, ausser, bei, mit, nach, seit, von, and zu.
> Teacher: Very good. You may to the head of the class go.

This use of the technique would, of course, be completely at odds with the aural-oral approach as usually understood.

[6]Charles C. Fries, Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1945), p. 3.

[7]Fries, "On the Oral Approach," ELEC Publications, 4,2 (Tokyo, 1960).

[8]Leonard Bloomfield, Language (New York, 1933), pp. 22-37.

[9]John B. Carroll, The Study of Language (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), pp. 99, 191.

[10]Leonard Bloomfield, Outline Guide for the Practical Study of Foreign Languages (Baltimore, 1942), p. 12.

[11]Freeman W. Twaddell, "Preface to the First-Year Seminar Script, 1958" ELEC Publications, 3,2 (Tokyo, 1959).

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